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ABSTRACT

Early childhood educators across Australia are starting to rethink traditional approaches to planning in early childhood education, including respecting children as powerful, competent learners; valuing families as partners; and developing new approaches to observation and record keeping that encourage dynamism and flexibility. This booklet explores a focus shift from traditional concepts of predetermined planning, into the more dynamic approach of teacher/child co-creation of curriculum to provide intellectual and creative challenges for staff. The booklet also includes examples to show these changes, including increased interaction with children through balanced child/teacher input. Throughout the booklet are "Think and Chat" boxes to encourage ways of rethinking and implementing changes in the early childhood workplace. A list of 9 suggested sources for further reading is included. (HTH)

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AECA ... voice for young children

Meaningful PLANNING

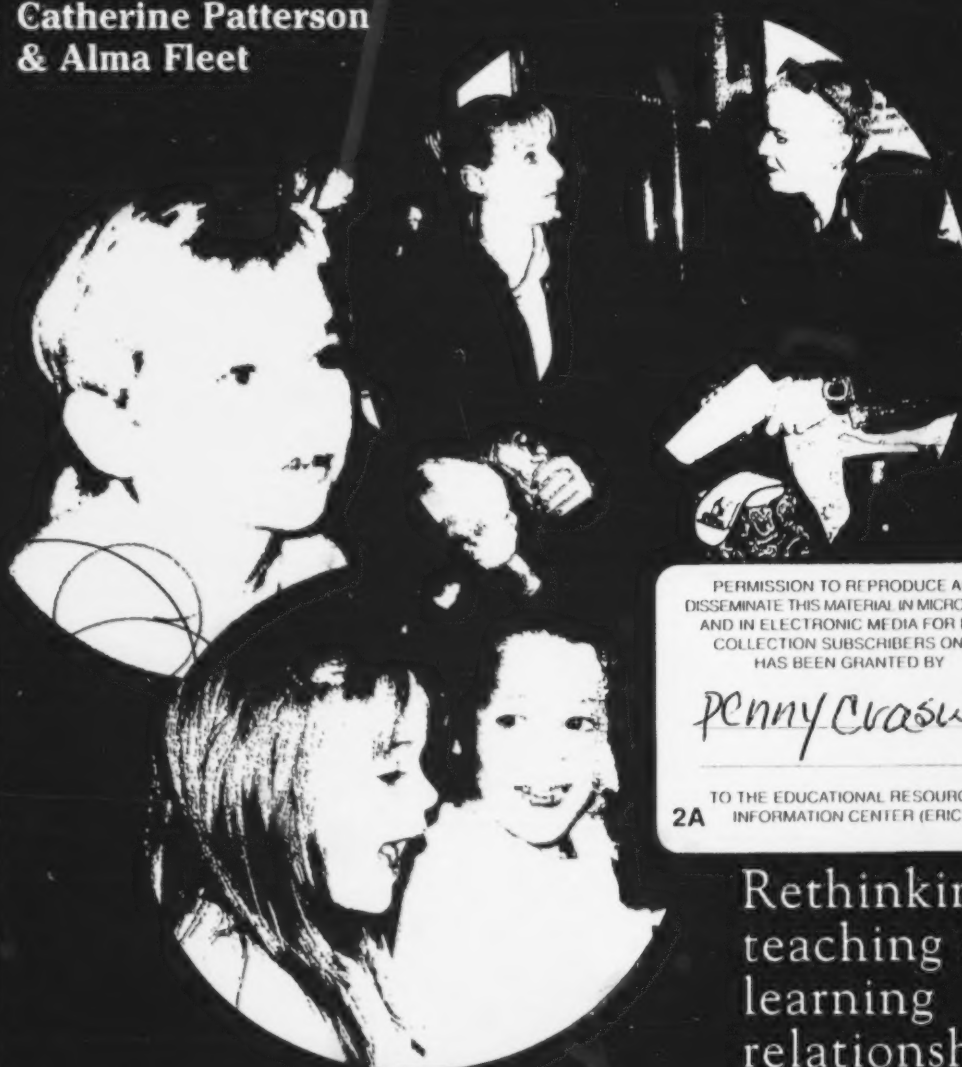
Catherine Patterson
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The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. AECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services. AECA is a leading specialist publisher of early childhood literature.

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The AECA Research in Practice Series is published four times each year by the Australian Early Childhood Association.

The series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children's services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children. Books produced in previous years have now become standard texts in many early childhood courses.

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If you are interested in writing for the AECA Research in Practice Series or any other AECA publication, please contact the Publications Section of AECA for further information on the preparation of manuscripts and for a copy of the Guidelines for Contributors.

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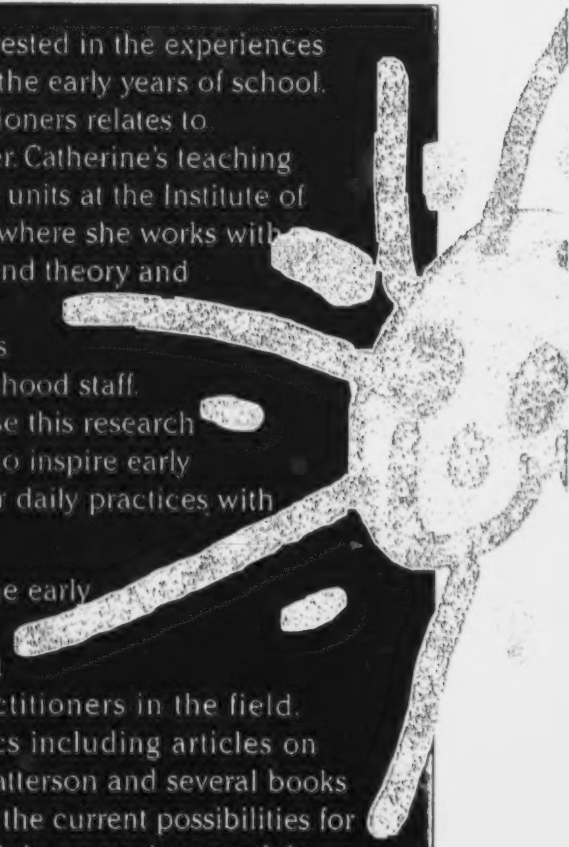
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Catherine Patterson is particularly interested in the experiences of early childhood staff in centres and the early years of school. This interest in the daily lives of practitioners relates to major aspects of her professional career. Catherine's teaching responsibilities focus on the practicum units at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, where she works with preservice students to help them to blend theory and practice. Her research is related to her teaching though a focus on the realities of teaching and learning for early childhood staff. Dr Patterson and Dr Fleet are able to use this research in professional development seminars to inspire early childhood practitioners to re-think their daily practices with children and adults.

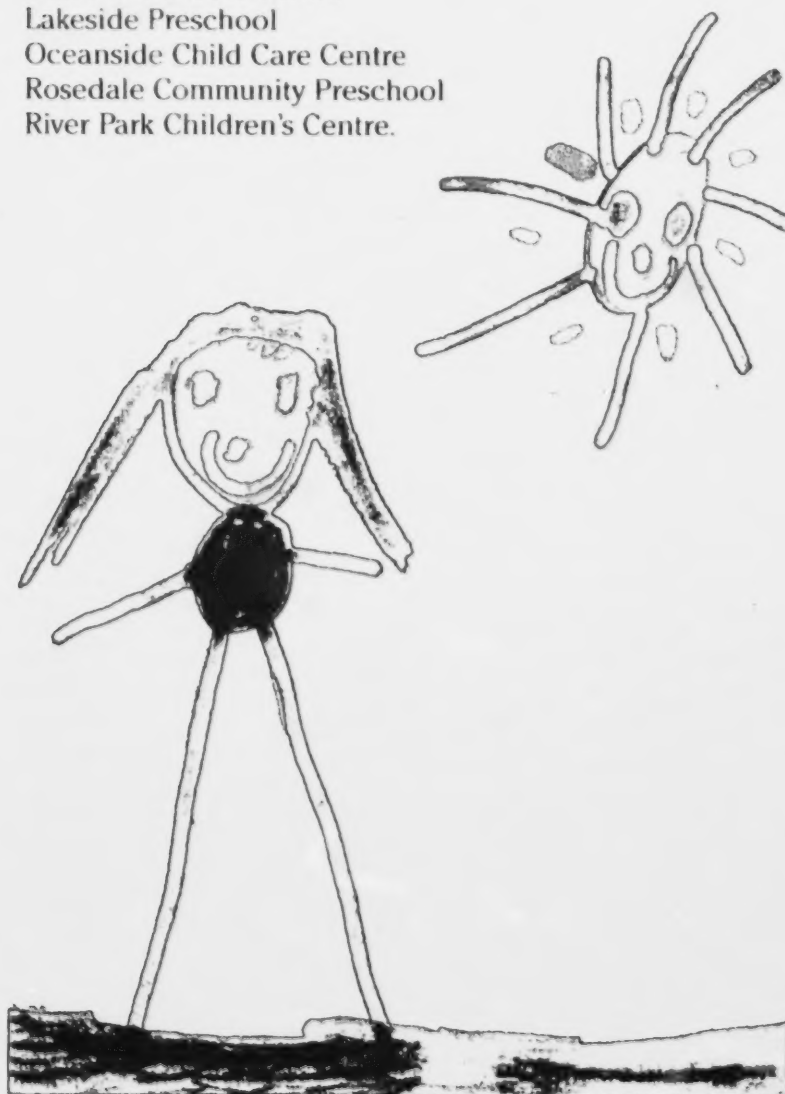
Alma Fleet has worked and taught in the early childhood field for many years. She is committed to professional development for herself, student teachers and practitioners in the field. Dr Fleet publishes on a range of topics including articles on planning 'beyond the boxes' with Dr Patterson and several books with other colleagues. She is excited by the current possibilities for change in the early childhood field and the commitment of those working in the field. Currently, Dr Fleet is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Sydney.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the staff at the following centres for their contributions to our study. Centre names have been changed for anonymity.

The Children's House
City Child Care Centre
Coast Road Children's Centre
Federation Child Care Centre
First Avenue Child Care Centre
Four Winds Children's Centre
Greenfields Preschool
Jacaranda Child Care Centre
Koala Child Care Centre
Lakeside Preschool
Oceanside Child Care Centre
Rosedale Community Preschool
River Park Children's Centre.



To the staff at Oceanside Child Care Centre,

Day after day we rush in and drop the girls off and later we dash in and pick them up. Sometimes we have time to apologise for the head lice or inquire about a lost sock. We grab what information we can from the sheets you carefully write out, and notice things that are pointed out to us by the girls. We carry home the paintings and drawings and craft work in the same hands that clutch wet clothes.

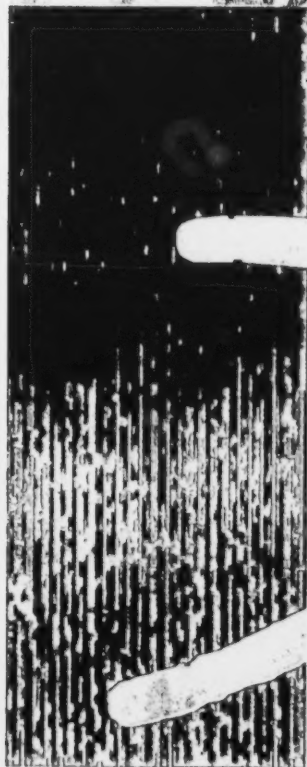
Conversations we have with you are brief, always interrupted by small voices or hands and always focus away from you. There must be times at the end of a difficult day, or perhaps even during a normal day, when you wonder how much we notice and appreciate.

For no particular reason, I thought it was time to thank you for the care you give our daughters and to let you know how pleased we are to be part of the centre you work so hard to create and nurture. You've taken the time to know us all in little ways and big ways; you make a huge contribution not just to our girls' lives, but also to the family we are trying to develop. ... I marvel at your patience and your humour, and love the way you share the happy moments with us.

I also appreciate the advice you give us when we get stuck and the support you offer gently and constructively. We don't have the benefit of a family to draw on for advice and resources, and you help us answer so many questions and deal with many of the puzzles of bringing up children.

We really like our girls. This is because of who they are and because of what you put into them daily. We couldn't hope for better.

Thanks,
Ann and Josh



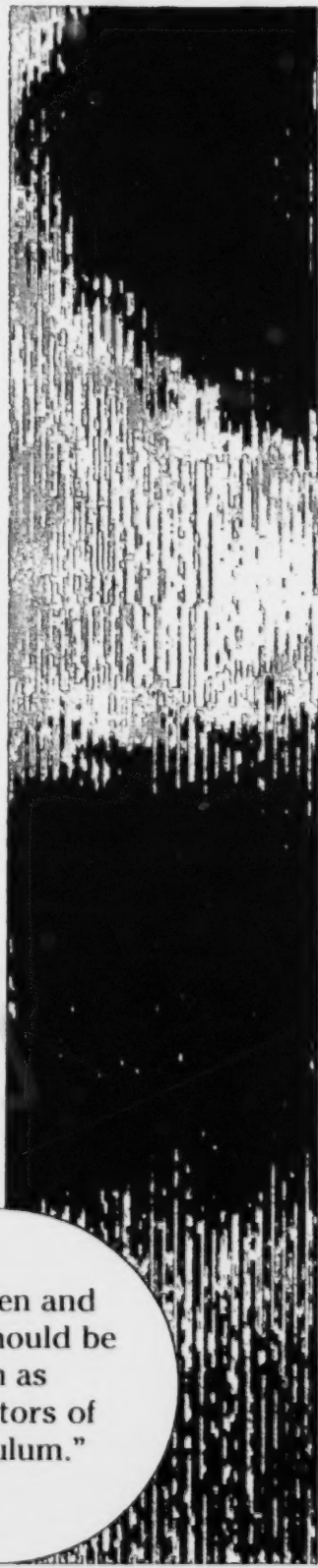
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The feelings in this letter represent much of what is meant by 'quality care' in early childhood settings. Of course, they are not typical of all families' experiences of children's services. What has been happening at this particular centre to enable this trust and pride to emerge?

In trying to answer this question, we thought it would be useful to draw on our experiences with staff from several early childhood centres who have been rethinking their daily decision-making. Their unfolding understandings may help others think through some questions that offer opportunities for insightful interactions, planning and recording. Initially, staff from each of the centres joined one of our workshops exploring ideas in the paper *Beyond the boxes: Planning for real knowledge and live children* (1998). Their interest in challenging longstanding approaches to planning was reflected in their invitations for us to join them during several regular planning meetings. These discussions enabled us to understand local issues and to brainstorm a range of possible responses.

We have compiled composites of centres from many people who have shared their planning meetings, ideas and questions with us. Both to protect their privacy and to extend relevance for more centres, we have blurred the identities of centres while drawing heavily on genuine experiences in actual workplaces.

The roadmap for your reading includes sections on the planning of meaningful and relevant learning experiences, respectful and authentic interactions with children and families, and the use of effective records to demonstrate professional decision-making. There are **Think and Chat** boxes to encourage discussion with your colleagues as well as a set of questions for your own practice to help bring the ideas together. We hope this application of research in practice is a useful addition to your professional journey.



"Children and adults should be seen as co-creators of curriculum."



Planning learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant

In preschools and child care centres, staff are beginning to rethink traditional approaches to planning pre-determined weekly programs in a grid format containing unrelated experiences. Previously in this situation, staff may have felt that professional practice required them to set up new activities every day. This variety was seen to be stimulating and interesting for children. It may also, however, presume that children have short attention spans and need to be entertained during their time in children's settings. It may also presume that staff interaction with children should focus on the labelling of colours, letters, numbers and shapes. This orientation to children's experiences is gradually changing.

What makes an experience meaningful and relevant?

Children are curious beings. They wish to explore their environments and to discover more about themselves and ways of being in the world. If required, they are willing to participate in experiences which adults see as child-like ('making yellow duckies'), as appealing to children. Nevertheless, the offering of craft activities has become a way of providing 'take-home' products for parents rather than an enriching experience for children.

Cut-and-paste or colouring activities reduce the possibility of worthwhile adult-child interaction. There is not a great deal of scope for intellectual or creative challenge in decorating walls or notice boards. On the other hand, a genuine interest in ducks, for example, might involve an outing to a local park by a small group of children. It need not be followed up by adult cut-outs of ducks for children to cover with crepe paper. The outing could more usefully be followed up in terms of the adult listening to children's conversations as they 'play ducks' or invent their own swimming birds out

"In preschools and child care centres, staff are beginning to rethink traditional approaches to planning."

of corks and boxes. The difference lies in the importance the adult ascribes to children's theories about ducks (or clouds or plants ...).

This way of working requires a shift in focus from providing a time-filling, reasonably pleasant activity, to finding experiences that extend children's strengths in questioning and hypothesising. It also requires a rethinking of the practice of changing activities daily.

For example, staff at Coast Road Child Care explained that they were concerned about the rapid change of activities in their centre because there was often a lack of opportunity for children to practise new skills or revisit experiences for deeper understanding. As they began to change their methods, they became aware of children's greater engagement. Once their thinking began to change, they were surprised to find the approach of a practicum student frustrating. She seemed to be searching for novelty by providing one-off experiences rather than adding materials to provide richness to ongoing experiences. She also seemed unaware of the concept of extended investigations, where small groups of children are supported in their attempts to explore an aspect of their world. Until the student had come in, the staff hadn't realised how much they had become used to the idea that investigations of everyday topics and events might continue for some time with different small groups of children.

There is often a misinterpretation, when newer planning ideas are being explored, that all experiences must emerge from the children by either 'asking them what they want to learn' or 'waiting for an interest to show itself'. A blend of child-initiated and adult-initiated ideas is a valuable key to the provision of relevant experiences. Some adult decisions will be empowering for children and responsive to their concerns. The challenge is to avoid topics that are banal, superficial and trivial; there are, of course, a myriad of ways to meet this challenge. Children and adults should be seen as co-creators of curriculum, where children, staff and parents are creating the curriculum together.

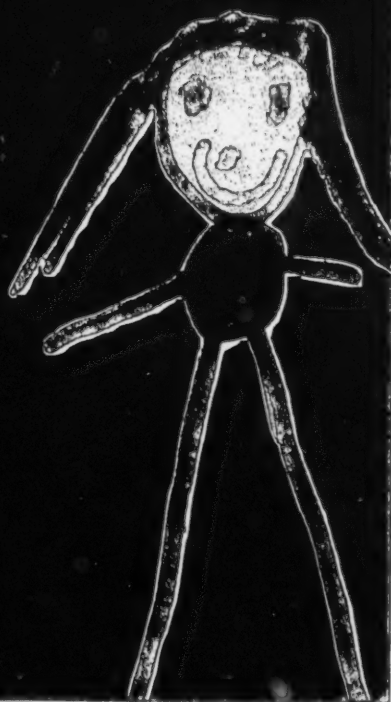
"As they began to change their methods, they became aware of children's greater engagement."



Think and Chat

How can we take responsibility for planning and feel a sense of direction, yet allow for flexibility to follow the children's input?

How can we make sure that the youngest children have an opportunity to contribute?



At City Care, a work-based centre, an investigation began to unfold into the site where the centre was located. Children had developed an interest in visiting parent offices and work spaces. They hypothesised about what they might see around the site through sketches and conversations. Small groups visited different offices and took photographs of people working. There was great potential for teasing out what children thought 'work' was and whether they considered that children 'work'. Such questions could be left open-ended or pursued in further discussion with families. In this case, later visits enabled an extension of the initial interest into the car parks, specialised buildings and equipment at the site. An overhead photograph prompted the construction of a 3-D map which included functioning security gates and a neighbouring communications tower. Interest in the investigation waxed and waned and involved different children over time.

Along with this interest in exploring the local environment for research possibilities with children, staff in many settings are also re-thinking the current trend of 'preparing children for school'. For example, staff at Lakeside Preschool have begun to explore the implications of the concept that a child has a right to live in the present. Shelley (the director) explained:

All this re-thinking has helped change my philosophy on children—which has been good. If the children are only four years old, they should be treated as four-year-olds and allowed to experience what it is like to be four. They are not five. This idea was a major change for me. ... It made a lot of sense when I thought about it and it has actually led to me looking at the children very differently this year. ... I was very proud of myself because I actually took on a new philosophy.

Yeah, when children are four ... why should they be practising for school? We used to be very big on that. We were into practising for reading and practising for writing. And we would practise sitting 'properly'. I mean, who needs to practise sitting? Now I believe that you really need a purpose to do things. Children are no different to adults. They need a reason for doing things.

Staff in other centres have been grappling with the idea that, generally, it is not appropriate to plan the same activities for children who attend a service on different days of the week. Such planning may be age-appropriate, but it may not be individually appropriate. Rather than repeating activities, it may be more productive to ask: What are the strengths of these children? What intrigues them at the moment? Such questions also presume that staff have re-thought the current emphasis on needs-based planning and now see the 'needs' of children within a wider frame of reference. Certainly some children may have developmental areas that would benefit from direct assistance, but such intervention can often be in the context of interesting group projects, rather than in instructional isolation.

We are not dependent on children for curriculum decisions, although children have the right to influence programming decisions. Whichever style of planning we use, there must be space to hear the children's voices. We have to pay close attention to the children, become good 'kid watchers' and listeners and recognise children as powerful, competent learners.

"... we would
practise sitting
'properly'
I mean, who needs to
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Having respectful and authentic interactions with children and families

Underlying the previous discussion about meaningful planning is an assumption about the nature of relationships with children and families. A rethinking of the relationship between teaching and learning presupposes a rethinking of the way that people in children's settings relate to each other.

Respecting children

How do we have genuine conversations with children in our care? This is tricky because staff would generally say that they 'like' children. This may not be the same thing, however, as having authentic interactions with them. If 'authentic' is interpreted as meaning situation-specific and substantive rather than superficial, much of the everyday chat in children's settings is managerial or 'in passing' rather than authentic. It's easy to make the 'that's nice dear' comment because staff are in a hurry or distracted by other happenings. It's also a worry that we often have conversations with children that are more like interrogations. These interactions are frequently seen when staff question children during group time experiences and might be called the, 'Guess what I'm thinking of ...' approach to interaction. They may also be accompanied by a tone of voice that suggests formal instruction or a requirement to conform, rather than an invitation to inquiry.

"Genuine interactions presume that the child's contribution is integral, rather than simply responsive to the adult's questioning."

Genuine interactions presume that the child's contribution is integral, rather than simply responsive to the adult's questioning. Whether the interaction is a focused 'eye to eye' game with an infant on the change table, or a discussion with a three-year-old about a caterpillar, the genuineness of the exchange might be seen in the role expected from the child. If the adult is expecting to be surprised by and to adapt to the child's contribution, the exchange will develop differently

from one where the adult pre-determines the direction of the exchange, and the child is merely responding to that initiation.

This open-ended frame of reference gives staff the opportunity of seeing the actual children as members of the group rather than simply a group of children. In reflecting on this issue at Lakeside Preschool, Shelley mused:

I've also learnt ... that I can actually sense their engagement now and I think I used to miss that. So I can actually sense the time when everybody in the room is actually engaged in what they are doing. And it is really a magic moment. You can look around and it is very busy and you can just see them all so engrossed in what they are doing. And it makes me feel worthwhile to be in a position to (a) observe it and (b) help to facilitate it.

Respectfulness also relates to approaches to children with challenging behaviours. At the Coast Road Child Care Centre, staff were chatting about their mental shifts in trying to see children's strengths rather than focusing on difficulties. When they told the story of Matthew, they reflected on the differences they were seeing in themselves. In talking about Matthew's social development, they noted that the tendency in the past, when seeing him hitting other children, had been to think, 'Oh no, here he goes again!' 'Now', one person said, 'I'm asking, what's going on in his world?' Others agreed that what they were doing now was trying to be supportive by sitting next to him at potentially difficult play times rather than 'gearing up for a battle'.

"Ideally, families should be involved in aspects of daily decision-making."





Think and Chat

What kind of communication is most useful for your families?

Do you make yourself available for parents when they drop off their child? Is this a good aspect of the work at your centre? Or is there something else you may want to try?

Perhaps if you have busy families you might think about weekend social picnics or barbecues.

Valuing families as partners

How can we meaningfully involve families in ways that enable both staff and parents to develop a shared understanding of the children? Even with their busy lifestyles, parents are often keen to become involved in the life of the centre. Ideally, families should be involved in aspects of daily decision-making. Effective partnerships with parents would seem to depend upon strong communication links.

At Oceanside Child Care Centre, when staff introduced the idea of extended investigations, the director noted that some parents had commented on the changes in the room. For example, one parent had said that the atmosphere had changed and there was more energy in the room. The teacher working with the older children said that photographs on the wall had helped parents become more aware of learning. Sam said:

They can see the photographs of the children working on the collage and they can also see the collage hanging up. It helps them to make the links about children's learning.

An in-depth knowledge of children seems to be a significant outcome of these new approaches. One staff member said:

I feel as though we know the children better than before. We know their individual interests. So that's nice because you can communicate with the parents ... I think the parents understand that we know their child better now, and this makes them feel comfortable to talk about the things their children are really interested in. ... So it impacts on them in a way that they feel the staff is recognising their child as an individual, rather than just one of a crowd.

Using effective record-keeping to demonstrate professional decision-making

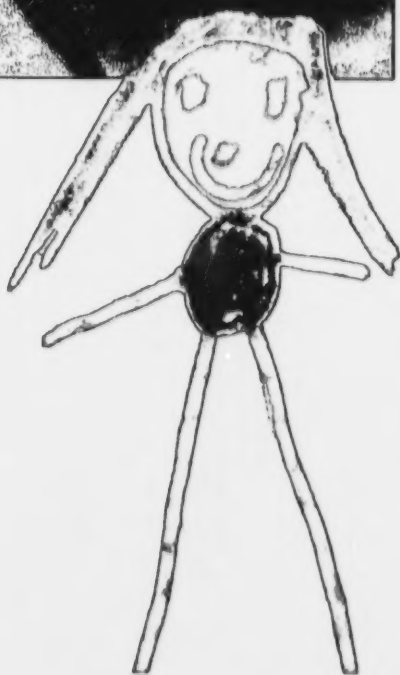
How can our decisions be made visible? How can we show what we are doing with the children? How can we show what the children are learning? How can we be accountable to families and employers? What do we do about anxious parents (and policy-makers) who may wish to emphasise academic success? How can we use our record-keeping to resist calls for a tightly prescribed curriculum, pre-determined learning outcomes and inappropriate testing for assessment? What kinds of records are appropriate?

One of the delights of this research has been the chance to see the innovations which people are trialling with relation to written records. 'The Program' has taken on many different physical appearances in the quest for meaningful and accessible ways of working which are professionally appropriate. Varying combinations of records are being used to log program aims while foreshadowing content and possible experiences. Detail about individual children becomes apparent through rich description of daily interactions as well as detailed analysis of small group investigations.

At Four Winds, the director, Nerida, had noticed 'the power of dialogue and informal conversations with children'. She saw these as giving impetus to the program as well as providing insight for the records of children, which are an expected part of work in early childhood services. Nerida then went on to say, 'Before, we were planning for the program; now we are planning for the children.' She stated that both the indoor and outdoor programs are planned around children's interests, with input from the staff who deliberately set out to be involved and interactive with the children.



"Varying combinations of records are being used to log program aims while foreshadowing content."



Recording formats

Can we change the focus from setting out everything in a folder before we do it? Instead, can we write about children's questions and discoveries after they've been made? Can we write down what materials we will provide, and afterwards write about what happened?

In the majority of centres involved in this study, staff felt free to develop relevant formats for each room, influenced by general discussions by the whole staff or by team leader meetings. Room meetings contributed ideas for possible lay-outs, with some teams trying several formats in the course of a year. Decisions about formats were influenced by a number of questions. These were related to the amount of time spent writing, the usefulness of the written records, and appropriate levels of detail. Other considerations included the wish to involve all staff in some way, the relationship of planning formats to other records that were being kept, and the value of formats for families and for regulatory authorities.

Staff were finding that the public display of 'The Program' had shifted from boxed grids to flow charts of linked topics or questions, or a summary of directions, accompanied by more detail about the previous weeks. Often there was a combination of daily and/or weekly plans available for parents to read, along with wall panels displaying photographs and a commentary on the progress of an extended investigation.

In addition, many people were searching for more authentic ways to record children's learning. After several discussions, the staff at Coast Road Child Care were reporting their surprise at looking at their past record-keeping through new eyes and seeing the meaninglessness of much of it. They had just discontinued a practice of putting the daily activities on a wall chart for parents, with a code next to each activity indicating such things as 'the children enjoyed it', 'very popular', 'should be repeated', and so on. In a chat over supper, the staff were in hysterics at the nonsense of this activity-

based, group-focused form of reporting. They realised that this form of evaluation was next to useless in terms of: letting families know how their children had engaged in the day; information for future planning; or useful information to add to the children's profiles. They were working on ways to display a web-based record of the day's events that indicated where children had spent their time and what questions or ideas had been generated.

Other recording systems have been evolving at Federation Child Care Centre. Staff in the toddler room are experimenting with the idea of starting their daily plans with a blank page for outdoor and indoor planning. All staff in the room are encouraged to use the page as they wish. Currently, the program is an on-going 'story' of observations, questions, ideas and possibilities. In addition, there are continuing evaluation records of the play areas in the room. The nursery staff, however, found the ideas of blank pages too daunting; they have begun to work from video clips of the day's events. They take time to re-look at incidents and interactions, and use the opportunity to gain insights about the children and see new potentials for follow-up interactions and experiences.

Meanwhile, at Oceanside, staff are using an A3 art book for a web of possible directions and activities. Each staff member takes responsibility for the main recording for a week at a time. A similar system of recording possible directions at River Park Centre included large-scale wall charts displayed on notice boards. Each display tended to include an idea or question in the centre, with areas of exploration (language, music and movement, investigations, excursions, and so on) in different sections. Possible activities were indicated in blue circles and changes and extensions were written in red, with children's names added to the areas where they were most involved. Most staff contributed to the wall charts, and in weekly meetings they discussed possible directions and the implications of observed interactions between children and with equipment and other resources.

"Possible activities were indicated in blue circles and changes and extensions were written in red."

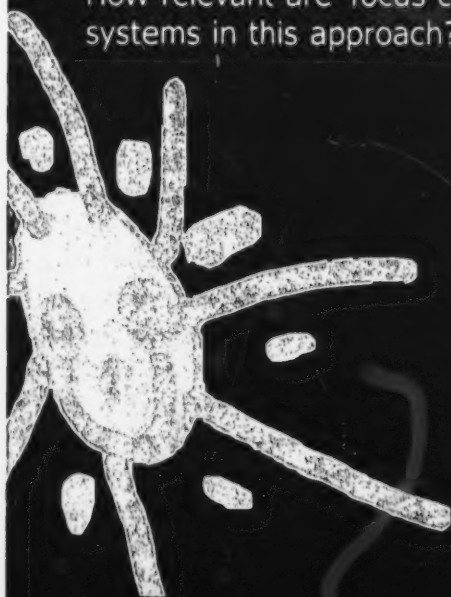


Think and Chat

How important are developmental observations for accountability purposes?

When intensive attention is given to a group of four or five children involved with an investigation it is a different kind of observation. How can all children be observed?

How relevant are 'focus child' systems in this approach?



Observations of children

Some staff have questioned traditional ways of recording observations in developmental areas. Is the focus on developmental areas still important? Or should the staff focus on investigations of the children's strengths and interests? The answer is not clear. This is a common challenge for staff who are beginning to work in this way and indeed for the advisers assisting them. The traditional emphasis on individual children makes it difficult to move the focus to the child within a group and to find new ways to record their skills, knowledge and interactions.

In considering their previous search for developmental observations, staff at Coast Road described how, equipped with a pad of 'yellow stickies', they would follow behind a child, mentally projecting the need for the child to 'do something physical' so they would have something to record in the appropriate box on the developmental grid. They were finding that this resulted in time being spent on trivial rather than substantive observations. Instead, they wanted to value 'the things we talk about', the things which stand out in a day, like the fact that Lucas spent a long time engaged with the clay, whereas he's usually distractable. They were finding that there was no time for purposeful recording if they had to work through a chart of required 'focus child' observations.

Trish, the director said:

I feel our children are getting more attention because we're not chasing them for observations. We're looking more at the group than the individual. We actually have time to sit down and relax and work with them and then write up later what we have done with that little group. It's made us re-evaluate what we're doing. Sometimes we were just doing something because we thought we were required to do it, rather than looking at it as helping children learn more about the world.

Pedagogical documentation

The other aspect of current approaches to recording that is attracting attention is the benefit of pedagogical documentation. The complexities of this approach to investigating children's experiences, and analysing their engagement with each other and the environment, provide rich opportunities for learning about children as well as documenting their investigations for others. The potential of this form of recording is embedded in a philosophical position that values children's perspectives as well as the co-construction of knowledge.

Sue, a staff member at a preschool, explained:

The other thing I've really liked is the idea of the documentation of children's learning. We've got a lot better at that and we've got some really nice work. I think that's great because it's what the families like. Now the parents are just so much more part of the day. If the children are not actually taking things home that they have made ... the parents might sort of think they haven't really been given their money's worth. So with documentation they can actually see what they have been doing. The children may have loved a story and we'll flow with that. They will make the costumes and pretend to make the play and they just organise the whole thing. It's really gorgeous. But without the photographs there is nothing much to show the family at the end of the day. The photos are time-consuming and you don't have a lot of time, but the photos that we do take are much more meaningful now. What we do has really evolved.

Staff collaboration

Effective change in an early childhood centre is more likely if a team approach is used. Time has to be arranged for meetings and staff should be encouraged to help each other and work together. Some staff who have tried to change their regular practices have found that the process makes them anxious and they feel tempted to revert to their familiar ways of working. Others have found these

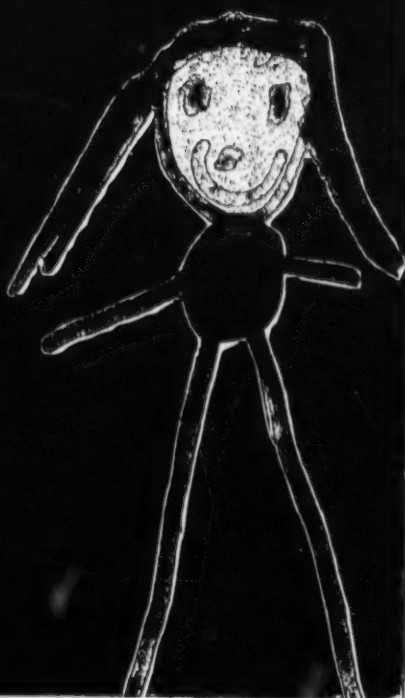
"I feel our children are getting more attention because we're not chasing them for observations."



Think and Chat

What is the atmosphere like in my setting? As staff, do we feel that we can make a difference to the way that things are done?

In this setting, how can we organise time so we are able to support each other more? Do we need to have regular planning meetings? How can we help each other and work together?



ideas exhilarating and inspiring. It's important that all staff are encouraged and supported in their efforts to move towards these ways of working with children and their families. One staff member explained the situation in her centre:

Sometimes in a staff meeting you find someone feels really strongly about something that you don't particularly mind one way or the other. Or you might have a strong view about it. I guess that comes into it a lot ... that you are just coming to an agreement about how far you want to go. So we are going down the middle of the road which I think is important for the staff to feel that they're happy with how it's going. So it has been an important exercise in teamwork.

Bringing it together

In trying to relate the ideas which have been offered here to your own practice, you might ask yourself the following questions:

- ① What interaction did I see or listen to today which has implications for what I plan tomorrow?
- ② Which other staff member can I talk to for brainstorming possibilities for decision-making?
- ③ What positive instance of a child's thinking, creating, social interaction, or exploring can I share with a child's parent?
- ④ What opportunity intrigued me today that I can revisit with a child next time he or she attends?
- ⑤ Where is there a possibility for bringing together children who share a common fascination or question?

- ⊙ How can I make visible some of my thinking about children's interactions and explorations?
- ⊙ How can I adapt my planning formats to recognise some of my new insights?



Conclusion

Children's services can be sites for creativity and intellectual challenge. They certainly must be sites where children are safe and 'properly looked after', but they are more than that. They run the risk of becoming one of two stereotypes: either a preparation-for-school centre or a free play-minding facility. Neither offers a site for wonder, or collaboration or engagement with purposeful investigations. A fruitful environment is more multi-layered and contextually responsive than one generated by traditional ways of working. Staff are asking for the opportunity to work in more enriching ways than they may have done in the past; children have the right to benefit from such an opportunity. It is time to engage in the challenge.

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Further reading

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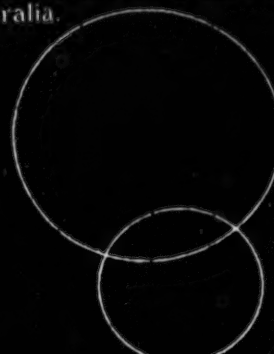
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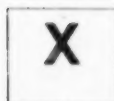


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